

Interview with Leo Niemi

Gwinn, Michigan

19 March 1981

#### START OF INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Interview with Leo W. Niemi. Age 65. Conducted in Gwinn, Michigan on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1981. What was your high school experience like?

Leo Niemi (LN): Well I was in high school during the years when we were making that move from the serious Depression into World War 2. So what I remember about high school was that we were very poor. I can remember that my sophomore year I think my folks bought me a pair of skis that cost me, cost \$2.65 and I had to make sacrifices all year for that. I remember another incident, I belonged to the High Y Club in school and it was a group sponsored by the YMCA and we were gonna go to conference over in Iron River and our advisor was gonna be, I was over there but I needed some spending money and my mother went over to the neighbor and had to borrow 25 cents so I'd have spending money on that trip. And I always thought about what a humbling experience that must have been for her. But that was her attitude and my folk's attitude towards it. They wanted us to get education and it seemed like, that there was... The school is important in those days and we were very disciplined and we did all the things, I don't think we necessarily minded it. Reading and writing and arithmetic were very important. Those things, even things like penmanship were extremely important and learning to type was very important and we had to do those kinds of things. I remember that my background, I'm a Finlander and my dad was born over in Finland and my mother was born in Finland and they were married after they were here. My mother went to school here but my dad never did so we always felt like somehow we were second class citizens or we felt less than other people in that group. So what we would try to do while we were at school we'd try, we'd become overachievers and we would try to get better marks, and we did! We were better students, or we had better marks. We always took ethnic pride in the fact that we were Finns and we were getting good marks. "We'll show them!" You know that kind of an attitude. But the schools were very important to us and I guess my parent's attitude towards the thing and it seemed that all the people in the community were that we were closely tied with iron ore business, and lumbering and logging business and things like that. And my dad worked in the mines most of his life and my mother wanted me to get an education so I wouldn't have to go to work in the mines and that was a big thing. That they didn't want their kids to have to go to work underground because they thought that was a degrading kind of way, a dangerous way to live. That was their goal, was to make sure that we had a good education so that we wouldn't have to work in the mines. That was the thing that they focused on. But I was fortunate I got good marks in high school and I got somewhere near the top of the class most of the time and so I, school was probably an important thing in the old life and we were proud of our school system and proud of our accomplishments in school and things like that.

I: The dropout rate in high schools today is about 25%, what would you guess the dropout rate was in Gwinn when you were in high school?

LN: Well, I remember that drop-outs was an important thing. But like I said earlier, the drop outs, people left school because they come from large families and they were, they need to get more income so the older boys in the family would leave school and go out and work in the woods or go out and get some job so they could help support the family. Especially if the head of the household was injured or deceased, or any of those things like that. It was very common for the oldest boys in the family to leave school and not complete high school or not even enter high school. They'd go out and get themselves jobs and to sub provide income for the family. So there was some of that going on. But it was considered quite an achievement to get a high school education so some people who had difficulty in school would get disgusted and go out and get themselves jobs. But for those of us who had a high school education or got a high school diploma, we always thought that was a great achievement and probably our ticket to a better life because we had achieved that. So it was important for us guys to do it. There was, and I don't know that it was 20% or whether it was less than that or more than that, but I don't know if there was much difference on that. But I remember that the reason for people leaving in those days was somewhat different than it is now.

I: What were the opportunities, like for high school aged students, high school aged people and recent graduates?

LN: Well, I graduated high school in 1941 and by that time the war effort was significant and we hadn't entered a war at that time. But there was, we were supportive of the Allies at that time so we were providing assistance and we were providing guns and ammunition so that... The steel business was on a roll so naturally the iron ore business was in excellent shape. So they were opening up mines here that hadn't been opened in the past and so there were a lot of jobs available at that time. Earlier in, I can remember when I was a freshman in high school for example at that time there were no jobs available or all the jobs were marginal kinds of jobs. One of the things that were in place at those times were the CCC camps. So guys leaving school would go to the CCCs and they were for young men who didn't have jobs and whose family needed income. So what they would do is the guy would get an income of about 30 bucks a money and they would keep 5 and send 25 to the family and that's how those young men would be able to help support their families. So there were those kinds of welfare programs in place because that indicated how tough jobs were to come by and the guys who didn't join the CCCs they could get in the service or they could also get marginal jobs, go out work in the woods and things like that. That all changed as that war effort got beginning to pick up in well 1940, '39 and '40. There were a lot of jobs available, a lot of jobs became available and of course the CCC programs and those kinds of things were ended at that time too as well. They were shutting down, but there wasn't as much need for them in those days. So I lived through that period of time where there were no jobs, the time when there was a lot of jobs. That all tied in because, the first part of it was the Depression of the 1930s and the second part of it was the war effort and World War 2 was underway so that fired up our economies so there were a lot of jobs available.

I: Were there ethnic rivalries in Gwinn at that time?

LN: It's nice to tell people about the place I come from, you know, and I'd always tell them that 1/3 of the people in Gwinn were Finn, 1/3 were Italian, and the other 1/3 wish the hell they were

because they always saw one group or the other dominated everything we did. That was true in high school and I remember my senior year in high school there was, on our starting basketball 4 of us were Finns and I was a dago and at times what we would do occasionally when we were in the place were there wasn't much pressure, when we were in good position as far as the game goes, we'd start talking Finn out there just to give Delacordy [spelled phonetically] a bad time. But it was, I guess the Italians seemed like they were more politically oriented, they had control and power and things like that. They were into the moonshine business and many of the prominent families in this area, there was very little income in the Depression years and those times were derived from making the moonshine and things like that. And my dad and a lot of the Finns were heavy drinkers and we'd do the drinking. So I can remember as a youngster my mother had real strong feelings about Italians because they were always making, they were the cause of her problems because they manufactured this booze that caused so much strife in our family at that time. People in the Finnish area, and I know my parents felt very strongly about, for my sister to marry a Lutheran and for me to marry a Lutheran, that was very important. She didn't want us, so that was a big issue in those days. I know that when I come back and I saw people who had Italian backgrounds in our Lutheran church that I couldn't believe it and vice versa. And when Lutherans were involved with the Italians, I couldn't believe it! There were strong feelings in those days and there was a lot of rivalry. I don't remember any violence or anything like that going on, but the rivalry was there. I think when you talk about violence, I remember most of the violence was within the ethnic group itself. I remember Finns getting in fights, when they got at odds on an issue they would often times settle it by getting in a fist fight. The Italians were even much worse than the Finns were at getting into fights. I remember sitting watching many times men in white shirts on a Sunday afternoon fighting, blood flying all over the place and things like that. I wouldn't say it was a common sight but I remember seeing it many times so it was, and all those kinds of issues were settled in that kind of a way in those days. But I do remember that.

I: How did you come to go to college and how well prepared were you for college work by the Gwinn High School?

LN: When I was in high school we had a counselor, a counselor for boys and a counselor for girls and I remember the counselor that I had was a guy named Joe Foster Moar [spelled phonetically] and I remember a number of things. In tenth grade we would meet with that counselor and talk about planning our next two years of school and related to what we might be interested in doing for life's work. I remember when Joe Moar asked me what I was gonna do when I got out of college I said well "join the CCCs" and that was what I had in mind because that was a big thing in this area. We had a couple of CCC camps and it seemed like a way to make a living, there weren't many other jobs around. And Joe Moar said to me "Leo I think you're the kind of guy that could make it in college why don't you think about going to college?" and well that just pumped me right up and he motivated me in considering that. So I selected my classes for the rest of my high school based on the fact that I wanted to go to college and I wanted to make sure I had all the credits in order so I could be eligible to go to college. And I got along well in school so that was not problem, but it was that high school counselor who provided me, who helped me make up my mind. From that day on there was no question about what I was going to do, I was gonna go to college because I liked the guy and I trusted him and when he said he thought I could make it then I started working, going in that direction. My big problem then

became financial. How was I gonna there? Money was a problem so, but there was, I guess there might have been some scholarships but they were out of my, I felt that they were out of my reach. I never even pursued that very much. But my parents were so interested in me going to school that they, because the work situation and the economy had picked up at that time, they made the sacrifices necessary for me to go to school. And I remember I lived in Marquette, I'd leave home on Sunday and I'd have 20 bucks in my pocket that would cover my eating and lodging expense for the week and so on. But that's the way it was. So money was a big problem. The getting into Northern, as I remember all I needed was a transcript, my high school record, and the money for tuition was all I needed. So I went to school during that year and the war broke out during that year. During the time when the war broke out, Pearl Harbor Day was in December of '41, so right after that I went down and I joined the Navy. And the Navy asked me to stay in school, for me to stay in school and continue my education and they would call me. So I was in inactive reserve. So I spent one more year in school, and then they called me. After my sophomore year they called me and asked me to attend a college training program at Alma College so I put my junior year in at Alma College in a B12 program. So that's how the financial burden was relieved when I got down to Alma. When I transferred from Northern and I went down to Michigan State my sophomore year, that summer the mines were hiring a lot of people so I went to work for my dad at the mines. So for those times I earned a lot of money and because I had a lot of money available and my friends were going to school at Michigan State I transferred down to Michigan State and I went to school there in my sophomore year. But that's how that came about.

I: In the high school world, did recruiter, did service recruiters come to the high school or where there other job finding assistance that the high school did?

LN: I don't remember anything like that. I think that if we wanted information we got all of our information from that counselor. It depended on how interested you were and he would give us as much help as he asked for. But I don't remember, we had in those days what we call a "College Preparatory Curriculum." So if you chose that you were gonna go to college then you took these classes that were in that curriculum and that got you ready for school and that's basically all the information that I know about it. But I don't remember, I'm sure that if I would have had interested in going to other schools then he would have provided. But I don't remember any...He acted as an advisor and that's about all I remember about being available at that time. Getting a high school education in those days was very important. So once you had a high school education you could get a job. I was offered jobs when I was getting out of high school to be a service station attendant and while I was in high school I worked as a grocery clerk and things like that. All those people were interested that you were, that you had a high school education or that you're doing well in class and school. That was the criteria that was the big thing they asked you. If you were doing well in school then that was some basis for getting jobs. A high school education in those days, opened up a lot of doors for people. A high school education was very valuable in those times. It seemed like it carried a lot more weight in those days then it does now for example.

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